Linda Fleming

At the Edge of the Unknown

BY MARIA PORGES

Helios, 2011. Powder-coated steel, 100 x 110 x 56 in.
Linda Fleming is always thinking about light—how it moves through, over, and around her work. In conversation, she points out how the play of cast shadows echoes and enlivens the complex, latticed surfaces and curving forms of her sculptures, which range from paper and wood maquettes only a few inches across to powder-coated, laser-cut steel works that are large enough to enter.

The chairs placed within Reverie (2008) make the invitation to come inside explicit, offering a place to sit and contemplate the surrounding swirling shapes. The intricately cut planes of intersecting lines might be diagramming the paths of stars and nebulae or maybe visualizing the movement of atoms. Fleming, however, gives no explanation of their meaning or origin, despite the fact that she is intensely curious about a wide variety of scientific subjects and reads constantly. She describes being fascinated by those moments—in natural science, math, or magic—when thinkers attempted to locate and identify the shape of the physical world by making measurements of it. Earlier drawings and sculptures refer to some of these subjects, though often, the work led to the reading, rather than the other way around. “Some Models for the Universe,” a series of pieces that she made at a residency in France in the early 1990s, evoke enormous versions of antique instruments, but Fleming was unaware of such devices until a friend showed them to her.

She has described her works as “sanctuaries from which to view the world,” whether in actual physical fact or in the imagination. The planes of lacy steel that come together to form Glimmer (2016) have been folded into complex shapes; we can only project ourselves mentally into their enclosed spaces. The colorful sculpture, 10 feet tall and weighing some thousands of pounds, seems to float over its shadows on the concrete deck of the Oakland Museum of California, where it was installed this past spring. Its shapes evoke a sparkling cluster of jewels, but the world beyond is visible through them—though Fleming’s use of a different color for the interior of each part draws our gaze back inside, even as we try to look beyond the sculpture’s graceful profile. The dematerialization of something so substantial is an unsettling experience, calling into question our perceptions and what the physicality of the world around us really means.

For nearly five decades, Fleming has worked, often on a massive scale, with many different materials—slabs of wood and steel, 20-foot-long logs, glass, and concrete, to name a few. One consistent element in her work, however, has been how separate components come together into a composition in which the gaps between them are as important as the parts themselves, reflecting Fleming’s fascination with light and its role in her art.
with the fact that matter and space are composed of the same (largely vacant) subatomic particles. As she comments, “When we look at something solid, it’s really an energy field. I became interested in how one could make work that would allow you to see the thing, see through the thing, and see inside the thing simultaneously.”

The organic curves of *Glimmer* and *Reverie*, flowing over seemingly weightless, floating planes, are made possible through the technological innovation of laser-cut steel. The origins of the forms, however, can be found in Fleming’s earlier materials and methods. In *Necklace* (2000), straight lines of steel are bolted together into a massive, curving form that suggests 19th-century bridgework. The steel beams of the obelisks in *Insinuation*, joined end to end, outline a form that seems to be suspended, improbably, above the ground. Both works are installed on Fleming’s land in Nevada—160 acres in the Smoke Creek Desert, a site currently being developed as a permanent location for her work. She maintains a studio and home there as well, where she spends extensive periods of time each year. Fleming and her husband, painter Michael Moore, travel between their studios and homes in Nevada and Colorado, where Fleming built a home single-handedly as part of Libre, an artist’s community that she helped to found when she was in her early 20s. Their third studio and residence is in the small waterfront town of Benicia, California, in a sprawling building that was once a Mexican restaurant.

The open spaces of desert and mountain landscapes have long been essential to the development of Fleming’s work. Spending time in these settings allows her to watch and feel the effects of weather and passing time on the natural world. For 48 years, she has walked along the creek near her Colorado studio in all seasons, looking and listening. She describes being endlessly fascinated by how ice crystals transform weeds into something like lace and by water moving downstream, always different from moment to moment. She takes deep pleasure in observing spider webs, as well as the movement of the stars.

But the studio itself is always at the center of Fleming’s experience with place: “It is the space where I allow my simple, barely discernible thoughts to become manifest. Somehow designating a place for the mind to leak into the world gives this nebulous activity gravitas. I have lived illegally in impossible spaces, spent endless hours demolishing and repurposing industrial, commercial, and discarded spaces, as well as starting from scratch building my own studios. At some point, the interior struggle shifted to comfort and solace as I began to realize that my studio was like an exterior brain that I could walk around in, see my thoughts around me as physical stacks of material, and think out loud.”

This combination of dedication to the studio and curiosity about the world has helped to make Fleming an extraordinary teacher. In recognition of this, she is the recipient of the International Sculpture Center’s 2016 Outstanding Educator Award, which recognizes gifted sculptors who have not only been successful in their artistic careers, mastering process and techniques, but have also devoted a substantial part of their lives to working with students and advancing the field of sculpture as a whole. Interestingly, Fleming—widely loved by her students and held in high esteem by fellow faculty—describes herself as initially reluctant to teach. In her 20s, she believed that it would disrupt her ability to make her work. During the first decade after she left school—a tumultuous time extending from the mid-’60s to the mid-’70s—Fleming occupied a number of studios on both coasts, traveled extensively, helped found an artist’s community, became a mother, and began showing work. Over time, she was invited to visit a number of schools to lecture and do critiques. She discovered that she enjoyed (and later missed) the stimulating conversations that took place during these visits. As she entered her late 30s, she realized that educational institu-
tions could be a place where like-minded individuals came together to “hash out their innermost thoughts, create a dynamic playground of ideas.” After stints at the Maryland Institute College of Art, the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Mills College, the San Francisco Art Institute, and San Francisco State University, she began teaching at California College of the Arts (CCA) in 1986.

As time passed, Fleming’s sense of the importance of engagement evolved into a highly personalized set of strategies for facilitating the kind of education she believed to be the most useful. “I realized that I could be within academia, but without an agenda or checklist. I could create a place where students could recognize their own thoughts, find their own way, and continue to do so after they left school. CCA was still relatively small,” she recalls, “and there were a number of amazing faculty—artists who believed that the only way you could be a valuable teacher was if you were making your own work.” After a moment of thought, Fleming added that she has gotten as much from being a teacher as she has, in turn, given students over the 30 years she has been at CCA.

James Gobel, chair of graduate fine arts at CCA, reflected on Fleming’s give-and-take with students this way: “What always struck me about her pedagogy was that when she worked with grad students, she brought her life experiences to the practice of teaching in a really meaningful way. She encouraged students to think about their own practices in a way that was more holistic, to think about living their lives as artists, understanding the responsibility of being an artist. Her home and studio are a complete embodiment of those ideas—she lives surrounded by her work. And she has always been connected to alumni she has worked with.”

One former graduate student, Llewelyn Fletcher, sent a long e-mail about Fleming, in and out of the classroom: “I met Linda during my first days at CCA’s MFA program… Our class time mostly consisted of group studio visits with field trips, including an initial weekend-long camping trip to Linda’s Smoke Creek desert home…we built trust and camaraderie as a group through actively doing things together on these excursions… The friendships created in this seminar group remained some of my most treasured.”

Following Fletcher’s graduation, she was invited to teach in the sculpture department at CCA, and as an instructor, she had the opportunity to watch Fleming in action with undergraduate students: “One afternoon, I walked onto campus and found her reading an article aloud to her junior seminar class. All her students were lounging on a ‘deck’ sculpture that had recently been built outside the sculpture building. I sat and listened for awhile, drinking in both the content she was offering and her ability to ‘activate’ this deck sculpture with a perfect example of the purpose for which it had been built.”

Over the years, Fleming has brought many of her students out to Nevada, sharing the experience of walking in the desert with them. Of the goals for one such class, “Terra incognita,” Fleming wrote: “Terra incognita is a Latin term used in cartography to designate areas of land that were as yet unexplored. Unknown territory, the process of
exploration, and the system of symbols devised to describe what is discovered are apt metaphors for art-making. Focusing on each person’s work, we will examine what is gained and what is lost when the unfamiliar becomes familiar. The vast unknown exists inside our own minds as well as in the physical world...The edges of the unknown continue to recede as the unrecognizable becomes recognizable and the dragons and monsters have to move just outside our gaze or understanding. We too quickly ascribe familiar definitions and symbols to this Terra incognita and in the process demystify and reduce the possibilities. We will attempt to explore the unknown without chasing the dragons away.”

These last two sentences not only summarize Fleming’s teaching philosophy, they also describe how she wants us to travel the unknown terrain of her work. In recent pieces such as Voltage (2016), repeating, gracefully curved lines reminiscent of the contour marks on a topographical map intersect with a sharply angular form. Like different kinds of music played together, they are simultaneously dissonant and consonant, working against each other and in unison. In Streak (2016), the angular form appears alone, a zigzagging line that the eye can follow continuously without interruption, like the mapped path of a restless particle too small for any microscope to record. Fleming—who suggests neither of these readings—wants viewers to have their own experiences of each piece. At the same time, she is deeply invested in orchestrating that experience and thinks a great deal about lighting and approach, particularly for commissioned pieces.

One such work, Northern Lights (2015), is permanently installed at Michigan State University, on an exposed-brick wall next to a staircase. The piece evolved out of site visits; Fleming brought color samples, considered the different ways that people would approach the graceful tumble of facets—from above, below, or on the landing between flights of stairs. Talking about it, her voice thrills with a distinct pleasure, as she describes her process of discovery and invention. But her anticipation of others’ enjoyment seems equally vital to her. Fletcher describes how Fleming’s influence reflects that vitality and involvement with art and life: “She is joyful, busy... excited, successful in the art world way, but also a dynamic reminder of the broadness of ‘success’ with the roadmap of her life path.”

For Fleming, as she retires from teaching, that path will continue, taking her deeper into the territory she has been investigating for decades. “I want to focus on the ideas that have always been there. We become more skilled, more adventuresome, the works look different over time, but the ideas have been there from the beginning.”

Note

Maria Porges is an artist and writer living in Oakland.